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SUBJECT: WEEKLY MEDIA WRAP-UP PUTIN IN MUNICH AND THE MIDDLE EAST;
NORTH KOREA AND IRAN; FRANCO-AFRICAN SUMMIT; RESULTS OF FRENCH MEDIA
SURVEY-- FEBRUARY 16, 2007.

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Although Putin's excoriation of alleged U.S. unilateralism at Wehrkunde and in the Middle East might have been expected to fall on fertile soil in French media, French editorialists generally compared his calculated outbursts unfavorably with Secretary of Defense Gates's measured response. French media reported positively on U.S. willingness to compromise to ensure an agreement on nuclear weapons with North Korea. Skepticism persists, however, about the "truth" of U.S. intelligence information about Iran's nuclear program and its alleged support for anti-American activities in Iraq. President Chirac's Franco-African conference provided an opportunity for pundits to take a hard look at the state of France's "special relationship" with Africa. A survey of French media identified radio and print as more relied upon and trusted than TV news. End Summary.

PUTIN IN MUNICH AND THE MIDDLE EAST

2. (SBU) Following Russian President Vladimir Putin's charges against the U.S. during the security meeting in Munich, the February 12 edition of right-of-center Le Figaro featured on its front page: "Vladimir Putin's indictment against the U.S." The daily characterized the remarks as "Putin's variations on an old Cold War melody," adding, "More than one participant in the meeting wondered if the second Cold War were being declared in Munich... The tone between Russia and the U.S. is getting harsher... and the Russian president did not mince words in stigmatizing the U.S. and NATO..." For left-wing Liberation on February 12, "Putin is the anti-American spokesman." February 13's left-of-center Le Monde highlighted "recollections of the days of the Cold War..." Laurent Zecchini wrote: "A cold wind...blew on Munich Saturday and Sunday... For his first visit to this international meeting, the Russian president decided to launch a verbal attack on the U.S., guilty, to his way of thinking, of a unilateralist handling of world affairs. The sometimes vindictive tone used took the audience by surprise... But the American Defense Secretary Robert Gates opted not to add fuel to the fire merely pointing to the fact that 'some Russian policies seem to work against international stability...' The new American Defense Secretary took pains to show that he is less provocative than his predecessor."

3. (SBU) An inside story in the February 12 right-of-center Le

Figaro entitled "The Kremlin defies Washington in the Gulf" related: "Putin's diplomatic trip yesterday to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan looked like a challenge waged against the U.S. in a region that it traditionally considers its own." The daily's Moscow correspondent Fabrice Node-Langlois went on to say that "The Middle East is the first area where Russian diplomacy is reaffirming itself since 2003. The Kremlin has been making it a point to stand apart from Washington on all of the major regional issues." The editorial by Jean-Christophe Ploquin in Catholic La Croix on February 12 underscored that Putin "is trying to strengthen Russian influence in a region that carries an American stamp... Russia feels oppressed by the advance of NATO... and Washington's decision to set up two bases in the Czech Republic and in Poland is seen by Moscow as a provocation... Russia is back on the front of the stage thanks to its oil supply... now the question remains how it intends to use its new margin for maneuver." Economic right-of-center daily Les Echos noted on February 13 that the "Kremlin is taking very seriously the possibility that George W. Bush could strike Iran before the end of his term in office... which would have repercussions throughout the Middle East. Putin therefore tried to impress on King Abdullah the need to 'calm' Washington down."

NORTH KOREA AND IRAN

14. (SBU) On February 13, right-of-center Le Figaro's Beijing correspondent Jean-Jacques Mevel wrote that "The talks are progressing." "The Bush Administration," Mevel noted, "is already in a tug-of-war with another rising nuclear power, Iran, and it has been burned in the past by the slew of broken agreements with North Korea between 1994 and 2005... A compromise, if it is possible, would force the North Korean regime to either offer more or ask for less." Also on February 13, Washington-based correspondent for privately-run Europe 1 radio, Francois Clemenceau, reported on the attempts to reach an agreement, commenting on "Christopher Hill's cautiousness... with regard to Kim Jong Il whose favorite trick is

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to change his mind." On February 14, right-of-center Le Figaro called the agreement "fragile" and noted that "Washington has discovered the virtues of compromise." The editorial by Pierre Rousselin entitled "Bush's pragmatism" opined that "Considering how North Korea has behaved in the past, this is by no means a done deal... The U.S. can nonetheless praise itself for this diplomatic breakthrough... This is what George W. Bush has been able to achieve by mixing his usual tough stance with an uncommon diplomatic overture... Only one year ago, Washington would never have agreed to anything but a total dismantling of the North Korean nuclear installations... Today, after the defeat of the Mid-term elections, George W. Bush is determined to devote himself to Iraq and Iran and therefore needs to appease the tension with North Korea and score points in the area of non-proliferation. The agreement in Beijing is the sign that when it has to, the White House is capable of exhibiting the pragmatism necessary."

15. (SBU) The front page and unsigned editorial in left-of-center Le Monde, dated February 14, discussed the provisional agreement and the editorial argued that "The five major 'powers' worry that states that have been stigmatized as 'rogue' by the Americans will acquire nuclear weapons. For years they have been trying to dissuade North Korea and Iran by alternating between the carrot and the stick and with uneven success... Diplomatic pressure and sanctions appear to have won over the last Stalinist regime on the planet. But with Teheran the tug-of-war continues... The Europeans have been negotiating with Iran for almost four years and have gotten nowhere... Urged on by the Americans, will Europe agree to toughen economic and financial sanctions, thereby running the risk of breaking the common front with Russia? It has little other choice if it wants to avoid a nuclear Iran -- which is the party line -- and American strikes on Iranian sites with the ensuing consequences... The North Korean precedent brings with it ambivalent lessons... Iran is aspiring to be recognized as a regional power -- something the Americans are not prepared to grant... And if tension has lessened in the Korean peninsula, the stakes are rising dangerously in the Middle East."

¶6. (SBU) In Catholic La Croix on February 14, the editorial by Jean-Christophe Ploquin was entitled, "Now it's Iran's turn." Ploquin remarked that "The hermit kingdom may be on the verge of emerging from its isolation... And if this actually comes about, several lessons will be able to be drawn to be used with regard to Iran... First of all that it is never too late for negotiation... Second, that the U.S. can play the card of multilateral negotiations and China can play the facilitator. The Bush Administration has proven that it can take the lead in a complex diplomatic game and it is easy to see Condoleezza Rice's influence in this agreement. Can this mechanism for negotiations work with Iran? There is still time... If international solidarity holds and if Washington sends the right signals, the Iranian regime will have to choose between two scenarios. Pursuing its nuclear program will isolate it and maybe expose it to air strikes. Renouncing it would put it back in a position to establish a privileged relationship with the U.S."

¶7. (SBU) On February 16, right-of-center Le Figaro reported that the pressure is mounting: "The U.S. and North Korea are preparing cross-visits of their two chief negotiators in the not too distant future... Christopher Hill's visit to Pyongyang would be unprecedented since 2002 when President Bush included North Korea in the 'Axis of Evil...' The visits could be a prelude to normalization of relations... and for the U.S. it would effectively end the 'regime change' strategy that has been the leitmotif of the Administration for the last five years... The EU has also said that it is considering sending a diplomatic troika including Javier Solana."

FRANCO-AFRICAN SUMMIT IN CANNES

¶8. (SBU) The February 14 edition of left-of-center Le Monde devoted two pages to "France-Africa: The End of the Chirac Years." An op-ed by Serge Michailof, professor at Sciences Po, charged that with regard to Africa, France is "stingy." On February 15, right-of-center Le Figaro's senior Africa correspondent discussed the "six issues that poison the Franco-African relationship." The article listed the peace treaty with Algeria, the Borrel affair in Djibouti, the Rwandan genocide, the Brazzaville Beach disappearances, the Falcone affair in Angola and the attack on the Licorne forces in the Ivory Coast as reflecting the decline of French influence in Africa over the course of Chirac's presidency. Left-wing Liberation ran a two-page, full-color spread on "Chirac the African -- how they see him," with largely negative commentary running the gamut from "A suffocating love for the continent," to "Twelve catastrophic years." Left-wing Liberation also carried a

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piece on new diplomatic and judicial developments in the case of Borrel's murder in Djibouti. Catholic La Croix, for its part, devoted its front page to "Chirac, a certain idea about Africa," describing Chirac's policy as somewhere between the heritage of Franco-Africa and a push for development assistance. La Croix's series of articles included a discussion of China's growing role in Africa.

¶9. (SBU) In the February 16 right-of-center Le Figaro, the front page noted "Europe's role" in Africa, which according to the daily is "taking France's place" on the continent. Most outlets called this summit "Chirac's last goodbye to Africa." The editorial in economic right-of-center Le Echos by Francoise Crouigneau mentioned the "Political and emotional bond between Chirac and Africa..." She noted that in terms of economic aid, the influence of France was dwindling faced with the "growing interest of Washington and Beijing for Africa."

THE FRENCH PUBLIC AND THE MEDIA - SURVEY

¶10. (SBU) Catholic daily La Croix on February 14 published a survey of the French public's views on the media. This year's survey (an annual exercise for the past twenty years) showed that the French

public is avid for information but that it trusts the media only half-heartedly, despite a slight increase in radio audience and press readership as compared to last year (from 54 percent to 57 percent for radio and from 48 percent to 51 percent for the written press). Sixty percent of those asked say they question the editorial independence of journalists with regard to political and financial considerations. As for television, 51 percent of the French public stated that it was skeptical regarding objectivity. The study also noted that young people and professionals rely on radio and written press for information.

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